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ABSTRACT

A person or a group's accent includes not only vowel and consonant articulations, but also a predictable pattern of rhythmic stress placement and tonal or pitch contours, and a combination of configurational features that constitute voice quality setting. English as a second language (ESL) teachers should make their students aware of the habitual voice quality settings in their own language as well as in English. One could use the terminology of an articulatory phonetic model that is proposed in the literature in connection with descriptions of articulatory phonetics in other languages and in English. Using these as well as student demonstrations, the teacher can enable students to identify voice quality features by auditory as well as visual recognition. Techniques for building awareness of voice quality in pronunciation can be built into lessons. Students might prepare phrases in their native language and other students can then describe what they observe about the position of lip, jaw, and tongue, and about nasality and phonation type. These procedures are recommended for teaching ESL pronunciation and for enabling students to become aware not only of the teacher's voice quality setting but also of the voice quality setting of other speakers of English in contexts outside the classroom. (AMH)

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SUGGESTIONS FOR CONFRONTING PRONUNCIATION IN ESL

by John H. Esling

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Suggestions for Confronting Pronunciation in ESL

John H. Esling

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is often thought of as consisting solely of segmental articulation — the vowels and consonants that make up the phonological inventory of a language. In this paper, I would like to call attention to the other, longer-term components of pronunciation — of accent — that we can use and contextualize for our ESL students, in order to give them a more complete picture of what spoken English consists of, as well as what it entails to learn the sound system of any additional language. Although the vowels and consonants are the principal carriers of linguistic contrast (as in minimal pairs, such as *pat/bat* or *hid/head*) that differ in meaning by virtue of only one segmental substitution, the dynamic aspects of speech and the voice quality settings characteristic of the accent of a language must also be taken into account. This is true whether the analysis is for linguistic description, or for presentation to our second language students in a listening/speaking class.

In the following discussion, I will illustrate the voice quality settings and some of the features of voice dynamics that can help us to understand our students' pronunciation problems. I will also suggest how these often ignored but readily observable articulatory characteristics can be presented in the classroom.

VOICE QUALITY SETTINGS

It is easy to observe and recognize many of the long-term, more or less permanent, features of a person's speech. These are the voice quality settings that help us to recognize each other by voice alone. At a slightly higher sociolinguistic level, these features characterize not merely the individual, but also entire dialect groups or language groups. When we learn another language, we must pay attention to these settings if we want to improve our pronunciation in the language. In fact, I would argue that settings are one of the things that we notice first in a new accent. I will also argue that the voice quality setting of a language is an economic, concise way to confront the problems that students are having with the various new vowels and consonants in the second language.

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There already exists a very clear and detailed presentation of settings in a variety of languages, written for ESL teachers by Beatrice Honikman in 1964, entitled "Articulatory Settings". Her article is part of a collection of papers edited by David Abercrombie and others, *In Honour of Daniel Jones*, which contains a wealth of key articles on articulatory phonetics. Her aim is to inform teachers and students of the fundamental differences in pronunciation between

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ESL students' native languages and English, which can facilitate the acquisition of a satisfactory accent in English. Many of the characteristic settings described by Honikman are familiar to us from the students we have had in our ESL classes, from the countries we have lived in or visited, or from our own experiences learning other languages.

For example, Honikman discusses setting features for French, Russian, East Indian languages, German, Turkish, and Persian. She describes a typical setting of French as rounded, with tongue-blade and tongue-fronted articulation, with a slightly open jaw setting. German is also characterized as lip-rounded. Russian, in contrast, has a close jaw setting and lip spreading, with tongue-fronted (palatal) articulation. Indian and Pakistani languages are described as having open lips and jaw, with retroflex articulation of the tongue. Turkish and Persian are cited as examples of languages where articulation is performed primarily by the tongue tip. These descriptions are restricted to features which can be identified visually as well as auditorily, and only labial, mandibular, and front lingual settings are evaluated.

The theoretical principle is that a part of the acoustic information that we receive in the speech sounds transmitted to us is due to the habitual posture, or setting, of the articulators. The concept of voice quality settings is put forward most clearly by David Abercrombie in his *Elements of General Phonetics*. He distinguishes the rapidly fluctuating vowels and consonants of the speech chain from longer-term features such as rhythm, stress placement and intonation contours, and from the long-term muscular adjustments of the articulators which do not change very much during speech and constitute an average articulatory setting. It is this concept, that the segmental and dynamic units of one language variety may depart from a different average posture than in another language variety, that often puzzles us and makes us wonder why an accent is so easy to recognize and identify, but so hard to pin down and describe. The difference often lies in habitual settings.

SETTINGS IN SEVERAL LANGUAGES

The most reliable terminology for describing voice quality is that proposed by Laver (1975, 1980). It is based on an articulatory phonetic model and refers to postures in the same way that we would to describe a secondary articulation during the production of a primary consonant, such as the velarization or uvularization that accompanies /l/ in English when it is *dark* in word-final position. Using this articulatory descriptive framework, we can elaborate on Honikman's descriptions to identify voice quality features by auditory, not just visual, recognition. To observe any of the following accents, get your students to say something in their native language for the rest of the class to watch and hear. Tongue twisters are a good source of native language material, and should be amusing for everyone. This method can be practised in the classroom if your lesson focuses on differences in pronunciation and if all the students can see and hear each other clearly.

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In addition to open rounding of the lips, French accents often have a habitual backing of the tongue — uvularization, or sometimes pharyngalization, nasal voice, lowered larynx, breathy or whispery phonation, and often a relatively high pitch range are also common features of French. Some of these features are also found in a variety of accents of English, so they may pose no problems for the French speaker learning English. German accents are also usually more lip-rounded than accents of English, and raised larynx often characterizes northern German accents while lowered larynx is more typical of southern German accents. Lip rounding is also a common setting of Polish. Extreme open rounding, fronted (palato-alveolarized) tongue position, and whispery creaky voice are common in Norwegian or Swedish. Only extreme rounding is uncharacteristic of English taught in ESL classes, whereas a palatalized or palato-alveolarized tongue setting and whispery creaky phonation are common, and even prestigious,in some varieties of English, according to sociolinguistic studies of Norwich (Trudgill 1974) and Edinburgh (Esling 1978b).

Russian accents often combine close jaw, lip spreading and palatalized tongue body position with faucal constriction — narrowing of the upper pharynx. Retroflexion of the tongue tip and open jaw are characteristic of some East Indian accents, while close jaw, nasal voice, uvularization, and tongue blade articulation comprise the very different setting of many varieties of Chinese. Extreme uvularization is often found in Hebrew and faucal constriction in some Arabic. Lowered larynx, with faucal constriction and uvularization, and labial spreading may be found in Japanese while tongue tip articulation, nasal voice and whispery voice characterize many Persian accents.

Because of dialect and individual differences, it is of course impossible to be precise about the combination of settings that characterizes a given language group. This requires detailed sociolinguistic comparison of a large sample of speakers. Furthermore, some training is required to recognize many of these features. We should be able, however, to teach ourselves some of these differences in voice quality setting by observing our students, and having them observe us, and each other, beginning with settings which are easiest to pick out visually.

VOICE DYNAMICS

Rhythm and intonation comprise another phonetic category that we should study to help our ESL students improve their comprehension and fluency. Often, however, this is neglected, so I will give an example of where this problem arises, suggest some descriptions that might be helpful for study, and mention the type of method that can be used to present the material.

Vietnamese differs considerably from English in pronunciation. Part of this difference lies in voice quality setting; part lies in the vowel and consonant inventories in the two languages, and part lies in the voice dynamics — the prosodics, the suprasegmental phonology — of the languages. To analyze voice quality setting, follow the suggestions in the section of this paper on techniques. Be aware of (closeness of) jaw setting, lip position, and tongue body position which may be held habitually in a backed (uvularized) setting. Segmental

differences are outlined in studies such as Killam and Watson (1981). Or, why not have your students teach you some words and, especially, sentences? Practise the setting that you observe in their language in the way you want them to practise your setting in English. Like Chinese, Vietnamese has tone, as well as rhythm and intonation, and students need to be presented with the equivalent phonetic system of English.

One particularly good descriptive framework for handling dynamics in English is that of Halliday (1967, 1970), based on Abercrombie's (1965) division of an utterance into feet with evenly spaced stresses. Halliday describes five primary tones (intonation contours) of British English (most of which can be identified by Canadians or Americans), places the appropriate tone on the tonic of the utterance, and provides a contextual (grammatical) meaning for the occurrence of each intonation contour.

These phonetic treatments are complex. The contrasts they attempt to explain, however, are presented very simply in classroom materials such as *Jazz Chants* (Graham 1978). A basic set of meaningful English intonation contours, supported by rhythmic curriculum materials would be a big help to students who are sensitive to tone and need to be made less self-conscious of how they regulate the pitch of their voice in English.

TEACHING PRONUNCIATION

Teaching pronunciation is an important part of any ESL teacher's program. A teacher's awareness of differences in voice quality and an ability to present features of pronunciation in terms of the long-term configurations of the vocal tract musculature can be economical for learning and beneficial to the students' performance in spoken English. Students benefit in their ability to communicate in English and in the realization of the personality or image that they project when they converse in English. Teachers, for their part, are better able to understand students' pronunciation difficulties and to provide concrete suggestions for improving pronunciation performance.

The most important benefit for the ESL student who acquires an awareness of voice quality settings in English is improved spoken communication. A number of segmental pronunciation difficulties may all result from the learner's inability to grasp the generalization that a particular setting — or long-term configuration — represents. The vowel and consonant phonemes of a language share features which can be taken together to constitute the habitual articulatory posture of that language. If the voice quality of the learner's native language differs from the setting normally found in the target language, interference will necessarily be long-term and the intelligibility of individual vowels and consonants may be reduced. Moreover, since settings have been shown to differentiate individuals according to social background (Trudgill 1974: 190; Esling 1978a, 1978b), ESL learners can find it helpful, and of general interest in their encounters with different dialects, to be made aware of setting features that reflect the range of social status in an English-speaking community.

Teachers should find the concept of settings helpful in recognizing what is causing many students' pronunciation problems. Several vowels and consonants, for example, could all be difficult because of one or two features of voice quality which are not common in English. Attention to a single higher-level feature may account for a number of collective difficulties encountered with lower-level segmental features. For example, in learning French, it is helpful to keep the lips rounded and tense throughout speech. For a learner of French who has difficulty articulating the individual segments /ü/, /ð/ and /œ/, it may be more efficient to concentrate on a habitually rounded setting than to ponder the individual segments as they occur.

TEACHING TECHNIQUES

Voice quality setting can be introduced as part of a pronunciation unit, as an alternative to drilling consonants and vowels. An effective method of sensitizing ESL students to their own and each other's native voice qualities is to have them prepare a short phrase in their native language to present to the rest of the class. This can be a phrase from everyday conversation, or an announcement, or a tongue twister. Tongue twisters are useful because they are fun for the students to produce and are a challenge for the others to imitate. They teach an appreciation for the difficult sounds of the various languages represented in the classroom and, what is more, illustrate the preponderant setting characteristics of each language. Ask the students to describe what they observe of the position of the lips, jaw and tongue; and ask them about nasality and phonation type (voice). Even with only one or two representatives of each language, a linguistically heterogeneous class can yield noticeable differences.

Another technique for building awareness of voice quality in pronunciation is for students to observe and make notes of the settings of various personalities that they see on television. Many programs reflect a variety of regional or social dialects in English that students often identify as characteristic or extreme, while national newscasts present a model which students might wish to imitate. Students can also be asked to imitate an English-speaker trying to speak their language. Such stereotypes often include visible characteristic vocal postures, and may give timid students an opportunity to practise pronunciation in English by playing the role of an English speaker.

SETTINGS IN ENGLISH

What model of voice quality setting, then, should be present for our students to learn and to practise? As with the question of what phonemic model, or what model of pronunciation in general we should teach in ESL, there is no simple answer. The answer must lie somewhere between the way we speak as classroom teachers and the traits of pronunciation which are most common to the greatest number of English speakers. While the latter requires considerable research, the accents we bring to the classroom are observed and practised by our students every day. The procedures suggested above are again recommended to get students to observe each other. Then, have them observe your setting in the same way, as well as the settings of other English speakers.

As a general model, I can suggest a few features of voice quality setting found in many varieties of English in North America. They are listed in articulatory order, from front to back.

a) lip spreading

b) open jaw

c) palatalized tongue body position

d) retroflex articulation

e) nasal voice

f) lowered larynx

g) creaky voice

A spread labial setting is common in many dialects of English. In others, however, in Montreal or New York, for example, just the opposite is true and a more rounded labial setting is common. This category is a good candidate for observation, recognition and imitation because of its visibility. ESL students with excessive rounding can practise smiling as they speak. Some segments in English are naturally rounded: /r/, /š/, /ž/, /č/, /ǰ/, /w/. Others, like the average setting, are spread: /l/, /s/, /z/, /f/, /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /y/, et cetera. The latter can be taught with reference to the general setting, while the former may be treated as exceptions and dealt with specially. Openness is common in North American English, but not in British English, as described by Honikman (1964: 75), or in some prairie and plains dialects. Accents in many television programs visually reinforce both spreading and openness.

Palatalization — fronted and raised tongue body position — can be illustrated by frequent vowel raising in English, as in *that* [ðat], [ðæt], [ðɛət], [ðɛ̈ə̈t], or *yeah* [ya], [yæ], [yɛə], [yɛ̈ə̈]. Retroflexion of the tongue tip, as in much Irish English, also characterizes many North American accents. Nasalization is a frequent voice quality setting in North American and British English. Extreme backing, or laryngo-pharyngalization of the tongue may also be observed in Canadian or American English.

Lowering the larynx, giving the voice a deeper or hollower sound, often characterizes Canadian and American political figures, and radio or public address announcers. It seems to correspond to impressions of importance or seriousness. It would be an unusual feature in a corresponding British or French context. Creaky phonation, or a low pitch range, is often present in similar British or North American contexts, and may characterize both men and women.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it should be remembered that our accent includes not only vowel and consonant articulations, but also a predictable pattern of rhythmic stress placement and tonal (pitch) contours, as well as a combination of configurational features that constitute our voice quality setting. Some of these characteristics are individual, while others have been acquired within the pattern of our

language variety and should be described and presented as part of that language to our ESL students.

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